

Choosing Forgiveness (Group Leader Guide)

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Getting Started

Forgiving others may be a simple matter for you, or it may be a struggle. The mindset of our culture gives us permission to cling to our resentment, broken relationships, and unresolved conflicts, but the Word of God gives us a higher standard. God wants us to forgive even as we have been forgiven. The cost of forgiveness is great, but Jesus has already paid the price. He wants us to follow in His steps and walk the road of forgiveness that leads to blessing. As you prepare for this journey, remember that the Lord is always present with you. He will give you the strength and courage you need.

Going Deeper

1. Sometimes we want people to sympathize with us in our hurts. The truth is, sympathy can provide temporary relief, but nothing short of forgiveness can procure lasting release. Why do you think people are content to wallow in self-pity when the release of forgiveness is available?
2. Is your reaction to hurt or offense in your life an attempt to seek revenge? To wound the person who has wounded you? If so, explain how you feel that getting revenge or wounding your offender would resolve your problem. Would that resolution bring lasting peace, or only add to your pain as a victim? Are you seeking relief or release?
3. Some responses to hurt and offense are not obvious. Instead of an outburst of anger or hope for revenge, there is the quiet, subtle eating away—the “gnawing teeth”—of a bitter heart. Is this your response to those who hurt you? Why can this kind of response be even more deadly than an outburst?
4. What is your initial reaction to the concept of forgiveness? Do you react in denial, anger, self-righteousness, or judgment? Do you perhaps feel hostile toward the whole idea of forgiveness as a necessity?
5. What characteristics in your life might indicate that you haven’t fully forgiven past hurts, even if you know in your head what you need to do?

For Next Time

Your heavenly Father wants you to explore the truth of “obtaining the grace of God” (Hebrews 12:15) to forgive fully. God’s grace is always available to us, but we can miss its power in our relationships if we are not careful. It may take considerable courage to examine your heart, but God will help you reflect on any areas where you are not, at this point, willing to count the cost to forgive others. Consider whether you are trying to forgive in your own power, or need to learn how to lean on the wonderful grace of God. He wants to free, encourage, and heal your heart. Will you let Him?

Grace Note

Don’t be afraid to face the pain in your heart. Before healing can come, you must face the fact that you’ve been hurt. Although James 5:15-16 is often quoted in reference to physical healing, it also applies to the soul-sickness caused by the sin of unforgiveness. If you are able to share your struggle to forgive—to not only be honest before the Lord, but also transparent with a mature, caring, and praying Christian friend—God will begin to heal your heart.

Chapter One: Walking Wounded

Getting Started

“Forgiveness is easy!” That is the statement of someone who has never been hurt. Most people can think of at least one person they struggle to forgive. The pain is too deep, and the hurt too tender. Christians are no exception. The painful reality is that offenses will come—they are part of the fabric of our fallen world (John 16:33). But we can choose to respond to offenses biblically. We can choose to forgive.

Since Last Time

Your assignment last time was to examine your heart and ask God to help you reflect on any areas where you have not been willing to count the cost to forgive others. What did you discover? Spend a few minutes sharing what God has shown you since your last meeting.

Going Deeper

1. Does the pain of your hurt or offense seem so great and personal that you find it difficult to share with others? What is holding you back from sharing? Perhaps you

have opened up to share your hurts, and people did not react as you expected. Do you feel like no one understands or can relate to your pain?

2. How does our unwillingness to forgive make us victims? How does a “victim mentality” affect our ability to respond to circumstances? How has hurt changed you from who you were before those hurtful events occurred? List ways that your offender is still affecting your life.
3. How does the hate of unforgiveness compare to drinking poison and hoping someone else will die? What is the source of that “poison”?
4. Why does “debt collecting” lead to resentment and bitterness? What are some end results of living as a debt collector? Do you see yourself as a debt collector? Carefully read through Matthew 18:21-35, and prayerfully ask the Lord to speak to you through this passage about any debts that you may be holding over the offender’s head.
5. Are there any people who have so deeply wounded or offended you that you feel it may be impossible to forgive them? If so, describe what goes on in your heart emotionally (or in your body physically) when you hear their names, know that you may run into them, or have to be in the same room with them.
6. How should a Christian deal with recurring offenses, especially those that open up old wounds?
7. How might unforgiveness affect our prayers? (See Mark 11:25.)

On Your Own

Picture the person who has caused you the most hurt or the person who has greatly offended you. Imagine forgiving that person, and write down what that would look like. If you struggle with this exercise, imagine that your circumstance happened to a friend. What would forgiveness look like if your friend forgave his or her offender?

Closing Prayer

Write out John 8:32, and then write a brief prayer to God. Tell Him your desire for freedom from the bondage of unforgiveness. Or if you feel at this point that you do not want to forgive your offender, admit your feeling to the Lord. He wants to work a miracle of grace in your life.

Chapter Two: What Happens When We Refuse

Getting Started

As you worked through the “On Your Own” section in the last lesson, what were your thoughts? Was it difficult to imagine forgiving your offender? Did it feel impossible? Were you surprised that God helped you to imagine the blessing of forgiveness? Or did you

feel rebellion arise in your heart—that you did not want even to imagine forgiving that person? Forgiveness involves some powerful emotions, but it’s really about a choice!

Going Deeper

1. What is the evidence that bitterness has put down roots in your life? What are some reactions that might be expressions of that bitterness? (See Ephesians 4:31.)
2. Is it possible that the pain caused by your offender(s) might have created a warped or twisted perspective in your life about certain issues? For example, do you fear a similar hurt happening again, and then that fear affects your relationships? Is your view of the offender an accurate one? Have you become overly sensitive because of your pain? List some of the ways your perspective may have been affected.
3. In the parable in Matthew 18, we discover that when we refuse to forgive, we set ourselves up to be turned over to tormentors (verse 34). Have you ever felt tormented by the results of unforgiveness? Describe what that torment looks like in your life.
4. Responding in bitterness can affect our bodies physically. Sometimes bitterness only shows on our faces. Sometimes it plays a part in development of chronic illnesses. Can you think of any physical symptoms in your own life that may be a result of holding on to hurts?
5. Why does unforgiveness tend to open the door for Satan to affect our lives? Describe any evidence of ways that Satan may have gained a foothold (or advantage) in your life because of issues of unforgiveness.
6. Define these terms in your own words (or review the definitions found in this chapter): bitterness, wrath, slander, and malice. Can you see any evidence of these responses in your life?
7. Bitterness in the marriage relationship can be especially painful and damaging. Paul instructs husbands not to be bitter or harsh with their wives (Colossians 3:19), but how might wives also express bitterness toward their husbands?
8. For Next Time
9. Sometimes our lack of forgiveness spills over to affect others who may not even be involved in the original offense. Hebrews 12:15 says many may be defiled by our unplucked roots of bitterness. This week, rewrite this verse in your own words. Reflect on how your responses to hurtful situations and offenses may have affected your spouse, children, other family members, friends, or church family.

Grace Note

The choice to forgive sometimes plunges us into the school of discipline. God uses the hurts and offenses of others as a tool to shape our character and show us our need to walk more closely with Him. The discipline of forgiveness makes us more like Christ, and it is for our good (Hebrews 12:10). As you continue to work through this study, watch for

ways that God might want to transform your life through the power of forgiveness. Be alert to the process of God's discipline in your life.

Chapter Three: The Promise of Forgiveness

Getting Started

One of the greatest benefits of forgiveness is changed relationships. In last week's section "For Next Time," you were asked to reflect on how any sinful, unforgiving responses to hurtful situations and offenses may have affected others in your life. This week, as we learned how to delete the record of others' offenses, we have the opportunity to take a huge step toward strong, loving relationships that honor the Lord. God promised to remove our transgressions from us, and we can follow His example, extending to others the forgiveness we have in Christ.

Going Deeper

1. What are some of the promises God gives us about His forgiveness? List some words that describe God's forgiveness toward us.
2. Whenever we withhold forgiveness, we are saying that we deserve to hold on to the sin debt of our offender. God offered His forgiveness to your offender in the same act of offering forgiveness to you. If you do not also offer forgiveness—as God has—are you saying that you deserve something more from your offender than what God's act of grace has covered?
3. Do you have to feel like forgiving (an emotional response) in order to forgive, or is it a choice of the will? What are you gaining by choosing to hold on to unforgiveness? What are you losing by that choice?
4. Rewrite Colossians 3:12-13 by inserting your name in the first blank provided, and your offender's name in the remaining three blanks: "So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved _____, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with _____, and forgiving _____, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you forgive _____."
5. From the illustration about Lorna in this chapter, list the blessings that she would never have experienced if she had not chosen forgiveness.
6. What does Joseph's question to his offenders in Genesis 50:19 mean? Whose place are you attempting to fill when you are unwilling to forgive?
7. Giving Thanks
8. Think about all the ways that God, in His abundant grace and mercy, has deleted your own sin. Thank Him for that!

Grace Note

Perhaps you have fears about forgiving someone. Maybe you fear that, by forgiving, you are in some way negating the seriousness of the offense. Or maybe you fear that justice will never be brought to your offender. Romans 12:17-21 is the framework for overcoming evil, and verse 19 reminds us that vengeance belongs to God alone. Your fears may be understandable from a human perspective, but forgiving isn't a matter of conquering our fears; it's a matter of faith. It's a matter of trusting God to do what is right. We place our fears—in fact, all of our emotions about our hurt and pain—into God's capable hands. Then we are free to move past the offense and see the offender through God's eyes.

Chapter Four: Forgiving for Jesus' Sake

Getting Started

In the “Grace Note” from the last lesson, we were reminded that when we cannot forgive, we can hand our pain over to our heavenly Father. We can be assured that He—the God who knows all things and works all things according to His will—will deal with our offender. But there's another motivation for us to learn to forgive. Forgiveness is at the foundation of Christ's suffering and death on the cross. As we gain a greater understanding of how God has forgiven us, we will better know how to forgive others. There is no better picture to the world of the great grace of God.

Going Deeper

1. Shame prevents us from enjoying intimacy with God, but God's forgiveness covers our shame with the blood of Jesus. Is there anything in your life that you have hidden or are so ashamed of that you've been unwilling to acknowledge it and receive God's forgiveness? Why do you feel that God can't forgive you?
2. Read Ephesians 1:7 and 2:14. According to these verses, how did God forgive you, and what was the cost? Did you deserve His forgiveness? With that in mind, is it right for you to withhold forgiveness from anyone? Are you placing your offender's debt against you at a higher level of value than the debt that Christ paid for all of your offenses against Him?
3. Do you believe that God knew this offense would come into your life? Do you believe that He could have prevented it? Are you angry with Him, then, because He didn't?
4. Can you imagine that God could have a perspective on your circumstances that you can't possibly have at this moment? Could He bring good even out of your deepest hurt? Do you believe that God loves you that much?
5. Can you imagine that God might even have a higher purpose for your offender? As you think about the story of Philemon, can you think of modern-day examples of

people who were forgiven and restored through grace, and then went on to minister with great fruitfulness for Christ?

6. What is the difference between trying to “forgive yourself” versus receiving God’s forgiveness? Why is forgiveness vertical and horizontal, but not internal?
7. How does a Christian deal with the regret, guilt, and shame of personal sin that causes others pain?
8. Explain the meaning of the phrase “Forgiveness in ... Forgiveness out” with a personal example from your life.

On Your Own

Romans 8:28-29 are familiar verses, especially part of verse 28—“all things work together for good”—but read Romans 8:28 slowly, thoughtfully, and prayerfully this week. Reflect on each word and thought. Then, in place of the words “all things” insert the offense that you are still holding on to, or your most difficult area of struggle with ongoing hurts.

Read Romans 8:29 in the same way, and answer the following questions sincerely: Are the pain and offense that you have suffered worth enduring in order to be transformed into the image of Christ? Which would you rather have—an untouched life that bears no resemblance to the Savior, or painful circumstances that will change you and prepare you for eternity?

Grace Note

Our choices create our character, but they also can make a difference in others’ lives. Your willingness to forgive may even make a difference in how you share the message of the Gospel with others. Everyone in your sphere of influence needs a demonstration of the grace of God and the power of Christ’s resurrection. The world is watching! Your choice to forgive is a powerful witness to your family, your friends, and your neighbors.

Chapter Five: The Art of Forgiveness

Getting Started

How has this study been helpful to you? In what ways have you found it difficult or challenging? With this chapter, we take a slight turn in our journey of forgiveness. We’ve spent time explaining the “why” of forgiveness; now we will focus on the “how.” How does the healing of forgiveness come? How do we find greater intimacy with God and freedom in our relationships?

Going Deeper

1. Did you go through the practical steps suggested in this chapter? If not, why not do that now? Spend some time thinking through each of your responses before the Lord. Be honest. Get real!
2. God gives you the choice of freedom, fullness, and fruitfulness in forgiveness ... or bitterness, bondage, and barrenness without forgiveness. Picture these choices as two sides of a balance scale. What are the benefits of hanging on to your anger and bitterness? What are the benefits of forgiving your offender? That's the human perspective. Now, ask God for His perspective. What happens to the side of the scale that represents forgiveness?
3. God gave us our emotions, and He wants us to use them wisely. Emotions may affect our natural ability to be willing to forgive, but do our emotions have to change before we can forgive?
4. Why is forgetting the offense not a requirement of true forgiveness?
5. What if the offender is 99 percent wrong in the hurtful circumstance and you are only 1 percent wrong? How does God want you to respond?
6. Is there a difference between "releasing" an offender and "turning over" an offender to God?

Prayer Support

Have you been able to walk through the steps to forgiveness described in this chapter? Perhaps you need some extra support. Do you have some spiritually mature friends or members of your church family whom you could enlist to pray for you as you allow the Lord to lead you through this process? Ask the Lord to bring some names to your mind. Then, as a step of faith, ask for prayer support. Ask your prayer warriors to pray for the grace of God to cover you as you deal with some serious decisions.

Grace Note

It's easy to forget, in the midst of our pain, that God controls the universe, and He has not forgotten us for one moment. Our lives are not spinning out of control—God is always in control! What truths have you learned about God's sovereignty and sufficiency that are related to your hurt?

As we learned in Romans 8:28, nothing takes God by surprise. He is weaving the circumstances of our lives to shape us into the image of Christ. We've also learned that forgiveness is supernatural—the work of God in and through us. We can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). And that means we can forgive!

Chapter Six: Angry at God

Getting Started

Ultimately, all bitterness is directed toward God. Do you agree? If so, why do you believe this is the case?

Going Deeper

1. What is your current perception of God's plan for your life? Do you agree with Romans 12:2 that God's will—His purpose for your life—is “good, acceptable, and perfect”?
2. Have you discovered that at the core of your hurt there is some form of anger toward God? Express your thoughts about this honestly. Can you release your expectations into His hands? Ask God to help you see His heart of compassion in the midst of your pain.
3. Have you struggled with hard thoughts toward God? Perhaps you have thought something like this: “If God is all-powerful, why didn't He stop my offender and spare me from all of this pain?” Do you think that God has ignored your pain and suffering? Read Isaiah 63:9. Even at times when God doesn't deliver us, He is still moved by our affliction.
4. Read about at least one of the following Bible characters and list any circumstances in his or her life that included unjust suffering or the pain of hurtful relationships: Hagar (Genesis 16), Joseph (Genesis 37:20-36; 39:7-20; 40:23), the woman at the well (John 4:5-29), or Paul (Acts 14:8-19; Acts 16; 1 Corinthians 4:9; 2 Corinthians 11:23-12:7; Philippians 1:12; 2 Timothy 3:11).
5. Answer the following questions about the Bible character you chose:
6. Did he or she deserve the affliction?
7. Did he or she blame God or feel abandoned by Him?
8. Did God abandon this person? How do you know?
9. Was any purpose served in the suffering?
10. Did he or she change in any way through the process of suffering?
11. Was God somehow glorified, or was His power evidenced through the circumstances?
12. What is your personal story of unjust suffering or pain from hurtful relationships? Answer the same questions (from question 5) concerning your own circumstances.
13. The clearest biblical picture of suffering is the story of Job. From the human perspective, Job had a right to be angry with his circumstances. But there was more at stake. God allowed us to see that there was a battle going on. Satan wanted to shake the foundations of Job's life. Have you ever directed bitterness or anger toward God? (Ultimately, all bitterness is directed toward God.) Can you see, through Job's story, that there may be more at stake than your circumstances?

Grace Note

We are so quick to become angry with people or situations that cause us pain. The Word of God exposes the struggles of many men and women of God so that we can see God's overarching, loving purposes. Some things we will never understand until we get to heaven. It is important to seek God's perspective in our circumstances, and to trust His sovereignty as Lord of all when there are no quick answers. When you struggle most with the "why" of your pain, don't give in to Satan's strategy to make you doubt the love, faithfulness, compassion, and ever-present wisdom of God.

Prayer of Thanks

If you struggle with hard thoughts against God, choose to offer thanks for His wisdom and love. As someone has said, "When you cannot see his hand, trust His heart." Your prayers will become a "sacrifice of praise," and you will find a place of rest, knowing that God is in control.

Chapter Seven: What True Forgiveness Is—And Isn't

Getting Started

Four common myths masquerade as biblical truth concerning forgiveness. Have you been fooled by any of these myths? Remember: what we think and believe affects our actions, so be sure that your thoughts about forgiveness align with the truth of Scripture.

Opening Prayer

Ask God to help you consider your thoughts and beliefs about forgiveness. Ask Him to help you release any myths you have believed, and to embrace instead the clear teachings of Scripture.

Going Deeper

1. Is it possible to totally forgive someone and still have thoughts and emotions that contradict the decision to forgive? If negative feelings continue, does that mean that the forgiveness was insincere? What should you do when struggling with emotions that contradict your choice to forgive?

2. Explain the difference between God’s forgiving our sins and forgetting them. How is it possible for you to forgive if you keep remembering the offense?
3. How does God desire for us to use the memory of our pain and hurt? (See 2 Corinthians 1:3-5). Share specifically how God may want to use your affliction in the lives of others.
4. Is forgiveness a process? Do we have to wait for complete healing? Why or why not?
5. What were three habits that Paul exercised throughout his life in order to continue offering forgiveness while living a life of continual persecution?
6. What are some examples of forbearance or “letting it go” in your home? At church? At work? In your neighborhood?
7. On a scale of one to ten, with ten being totally patient and kind, how would you rate your forbearance quotient?
8. Would those who know you best consider you a person of forbearance? How would they rate you on the forbearance scale? Would your children, friends, grandchildren, or others see in you an example of one who forgives as Christ forgave? If you have children, do you want them to grow up to respond to offenses as you do?

For Next Time

If you think you can’t forgive, remember that it is a habit you can learn, as God gives you His wisdom and grace. You can practice forbearance. Think of two specific, practical ways that you can show forbearance in your home this week. How can you show forbearance in situations you face at work or church? What part does the humility or pride of your heart play in your ability to show patience and kindness to others?

Grace Note

Remembering those times we’ve been forgiven will make us more thankful, and it will also make us more compassionate. Meditate on the quotation from John Piper at the beginning of this chapter. An understanding of Jesus’ sacrifice for you—enabling you to forgive—will help you to respond to hurtful people and circumstances in His grace.

Chapter Eight: Returning a Blessing

Getting Started

What if you have pushed the “delete” key and truly forgiven your offender, but you still feel stuck emotionally? Perhaps you feel paralyzed to move forward in your walk with God. God wants to bring greater joy and peace into your life as you move beyond the choice to forgive to an even higher level of freedom. Your changed emotions may begin with a simple act of kindness. And who knows? God may use you to change your offender’s heart.

Going Deeper

1. Slowly read through Romans 12 and list every command in this passage. Are there any commands that you try to dismiss as impossible to follow because of the painfulness of your own circumstances? Do you believe that your heavenly Father sees and knows the depth of your sorrow? Do you believe that He cares?
2. If it is difficult for you to obey some of the commands in Romans 12, write out a prayer to God explaining why.
3. Usually, when we are wronged, our offender is speaking or acting out of a deep personal need that we may not be able to see or comprehend. What need or needs do you think your offender may have? Although it may be difficult—and at first you may feel hypocritical—can you choose to lift up a prayer right now for the needs of your offender? If you have no idea what his or her needs might be, then simply pray and ask the Holy Spirit to intercede for you in bringing your offender's needs before the Father.
4. Our prayers and acts of kindness are practical ways we can return a blessing to those who have offended us. Are you willing to be a channel of God's grace to those who have hurt you? How is it possible to bless those who persecute you? How can choosing to bless those who have offended you encourage others in your life to do the same?
5. How can the hurtful pressures of life "enlarge" us?
6. Describe a recent occasion when your natural desire was to harbor a grudge, but instead you chose to forgive in surrender to the will and Word of God.

On Your Own

God specializes in turning bad situations into trophies of His mercy and grace. Sometimes He even redirects our lives and gives us a new purpose or ministry based on what He shows us about Himself as we respond in trust and obedience. How has God redeemed a painful circumstance in your life for His glory? How might He want to use you to show His wisdom, power, and presence to others?

Grace Note

As you do this assignment and the Holy Spirit shows you ways to bless your offender, you may still struggle with being a "channel of blessing." Remember that the Lord does not make His commands and suggestions without reason. The benevolent act that God wants you to do for your offender may be the final nail in the coffin of your own pain. He wants to change your situation for His glory, but He also wants to heal your heart. You have the opportunity—through submission, obedience, and faith—to help "rewrite" the wrong. You can overcome evil with good. If pride stands in the way, pray that God will

give you a broken, tender heart. Your heavenly Father wants you to experience fully the freedom of forgiveness.

Chapter Nine: The Power of Forgiveness

Getting Started

The quotation from Elisabeth Elliot at the beginning of this chapter ends with these words: “Who can stand up to the force of forgiveness?” There truly is power in forgiveness, but only when we make the choice to apply it. Have you experienced that power?

Giving Thanks

What is one blessing of forgiveness that you have experienced since you started this study? Be sure to thank God for His work in your heart. Thank Him in prayer, or write a love letter expressing your gratitude. Read the letter out loud to Him, and then spend some time in worship and adoration of our forgiving Savior.

If you have seen a change in your offender, thank God for that as well. If not, continue to pray that God would meet his or her deepest needs.

Final Questions

1. Have you settled the issue of why you live? Is your life’s goal to bring honor and glory to God?
2. Is there anything you haven’t dealt with—anything you have not forgiven—that would hinder that?
3. Do your responses to difficult people and circumstances reflect the mercy, grace, and love of God?
4. Are you totally, eternally forgiven and free?
5. Grace Note
6. Forgiveness is not a one-time crisis experience, but rather, a way of life. Reflect on what a lifestyle of forgiveness might look like, and then ask, “What are the greatest obstacles or hindrances to that kind of lifestyle ... in my life?” Don’t wait until the next offense to determine how you will respond. Meditate on the key truths about forgiveness that changed your attitudes and actions during this study, and determine that you will continue to forgive. How much better, when you are in the middle of a hurtful circumstance, to know exactly how you will respond—as Jesus did, with compassion, patience, and forgiveness.

God's grace will enable you to respond biblically in future situations and relationships, and every time you choose to forgive, you will showcase the character of God. What an awesome privilege!

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